APPEARED ON PAGE A1
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Man Behind the Mask

After 3½ Years at State, George Shultz Is More the Fighter and Less the Sphinx

First of two articles

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Shortly before Christmas, Secretary of State George P. Shultz startled the executive vice president of the Heritage Foundation, Philip Truluck, with a "very cold . . . very unfriendly greeting" when the two were introduced at a holiday party. As Truluck recalled, Shultz "jumped right down my throat," inaccurately charging that the conservative think tank had called for his resignation and berating Heritage for sending him "ridiculous letters."

About the same time, Shultz surprised the nation—and the White House—by threatening to resign if required to take a polygraph test under an order signed by President Reagan. The following day, Reagan exempted Shultz from any lie detector tests and sharply modified his directive.

Then, a few weeks ago, Shultz erupted at presidential chief of staff Donald T. Regan at a meeting called to discuss the U.S. response to the Rome and Vienna airport attacks by a Palestinian group with links to Libya, according to reports circulating at the White House. When Regan reportedly charged that "we have no antiterrorism policy," Shultz snapped back that the chief of staff didn't know what he was talking about.

What is happening to the previously unflappable, impassive, often Sphinx-like secretary of state? Is his recent uncharacteristic behavior a sign that Shultz is preparing to leave after 3½ years—a longer tenure in the job than any of his last four predecessors, Henry A. Kissinger, Cyrus R. Vance, Edmund S. Muskie or Alexander M. Haig Jr.?

"Shultz these days often seems fed up—tired and short-tempered. He seems more uncommunicative and less patient than in the past," said an official who sees him frequently. "There seems to be in him a little bit the sense of a man throwing caution to the winds . . . . I don't think he is looking to leave, or to stay. But I think it would take very little to trigger his departure."

Compared to his immediate predecessor—the mercurial Haig—Shultz has imparted an aura of calm, if not cohesion, to U.S. foreign relations. With the exception of the U.S. failure in Lebanon, the Shultz era has seen few crises and no dramatic disasters. Unlike the reign of Kissinger or Vance, the Shultz era also has seen no dramatic accomplishments for U.S. foreign policy—no successful Arab-Israeli disengagement or peace agreements, no strategic arms treaties with the Soviet Union, no new openings to China.

The pink-cheeked, stocky Shultz, settling back wearily into a yellow wing-back chair before a crackling fire in his office at the end of a long day recently, denied that he is losing his cool and hinted at intentions of staying in office for the rest of Reagan's term.

"I would like to have the administration end with a kind of sense of continuity, that the things that have been put in place have been successful enough so that whoever succeeds the Reagan administration—obviously I hope it will be a Republican administration—will feel that those are the right things," Shultz said when asked about his goals for the future.

"The interests of the United States around the world are moving in a generally positive direction," he continued. "That is to say, the strength of democracy, the strength of our basic idea of freedom, the developments in the world economy, our relationships with major countries, our alliances, all have been in a positive mode."

Much of [illegible] bureaucratic boilerplate, but in the view of Shultz and many others, a rebuilding of U.S. military and economic power have brought basic improvements in the U.S. world position since 1981. The administration came to office believing that an American decline in the 1970s relative to the Soviet Union and other industrialized nations needed redressing as the groundwork for foreign policy gains.

It has been easier to obtain consensus within the administration on rebuilding American power than agreement on what the United States should do in the world from an improved position. In the absence of a chief executive with clear-cut ideas about international strategy, or who is willing to impose decisions on opposing factions within his administration, the past 3½ years diplomatically have been essentially unassertive, unexciting and nondynamic.

Shultz's attributes of patience and persistence appear well-suited to such a time of relative stability. But as the Reagan administration heads into its sixth year, the international challenges of the Mikhail Gorbachev era and the internal challenges of bureaucratic deadlock and budgetary pressures may call for more imaginative efforts.

For the most part Shultz has been a manager of diplomatic relations rather than a strategist in the Kissingerian mold or an activist resembling Vance or Haig. The unpretentious Shultz's favorite metaphor for his job is that of a "gardener" of diplomacy, who persistently cultivates the soil of relations for some future bounty.

Little Things 'Add Up'

Shultz's notion of foreign policy leadership emphasizes small increments and modest choices rather than dramatic initiatives. "To a certain extent what you do all day is cope," he said. "A tremendous amount of policy comes about through the way whatever little things you do all day long add up, or whether they don't add up . . . . If you have a sense of direction as you are working with the details, then there is a chance that the way the details are handled will gradually support the general line or direction you're going in."

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